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# I Will Help You Carry the Earth on My Shoulders: The Rise of Female Affectivity in Marie de France's Lais and Christine de Pizan's the Book of the City of Ladies

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I WILL HELP YOU CARRY THE EARTH ON MY SHOULDERS:

THE RISE OF FEMALE AFFECTIVITY

IN

MARIE de FRANCE'S *LAIS*

AND

CHRISTINE de PIZAN'S *THE BOOK OF THE CITY OF LADIES*

by

Teva J. Glueck

FINAL PROJECT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS IN LIBERAL STUDIES

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**I Will Help You Carry the Earth on My Shoulders: The Rise of Female Affectivity**  
**in Marie de France's *Lais* and Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies***

*From now on, ladies and all valiant women may have a refuge and defense against various assailants, those ladies who have been abandoned for so long, exposed like a field without a surrounding hedge, without finding a champion to afford them an adequate defense, notwithstanding those noble men who are required by order of law to protect them, who by negligence and apathy have allowed them to be mistreated. It is no wonder then that their jealous enemies, those outrageous villains who have assailed them with various weapons, have been victorious in a war in which women have had no defense. –Christine de Pizan<sup>1</sup>*

**Introduction: Out of Our Rooms and Into the City**

This thesis will trace the progression of proto-feminist themes Marie de France and Christine de Pizan use to endorse women's empowerment through gynocentricity and female affectivity. As medieval women writers, both faced many injustices that went along with being a woman *and* a writer. Their solution, as seen in their themes, was for women to bond together to overcome the discrimination that hampered their lives and creativity.

Chapter one, "Locating Proto-Feminism" will establish my thesis within the larger genre of feminist scholarship and will historically locate *both* the misogynistic and proto-feminist histories of the literary works discussed. I will also discuss male writers specifically Chaucer, but also Boccaccio, who engaged in the alternative literary tradition

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<sup>1</sup> Christine de Pizan. *The Book of the City of Ladies*. Trans. Earl Jeffrey Richards. New York: Persea Books, 1998. 10.

of proto-feminist works. This section will historically situate the themes of women's education, woman as healer, positive representations of women's sexuality, and female affectivity.

Chapter two, "Marie de France's and Christine de Pizan's Defense of Women's Education," will examine how Marie and Christine encourage intellectual women and the pursuit of women's education, formally or informally, academically or otherwise. While a room of one's own is a necessity according to Virginia Woolf, we can look back to medieval women and realize that oftentimes, both financially and socially speaking, this was an impossibility. Woolf's idea does not foreclose the possibility or indeed the need for solidarity among women. Patriarchal hegemony was often the cause of social, spiritual, and physical ills of women living in the medieval Europe of Marie de France and Christine de Pizan. Thus, the medicine needed to heal these women's wounds would have to be located in the wisdom and hands of those not subscribing to the rules and authority of patriarchal culture.

Chapter Three, "Healing Guigemar and The City of Ladies," will show Marie and Christine presenting literary women healers in a positive light. Both women illustrate that not only *can* women be healers, but actually call for women in the medical profession and elsewhere to become healers to one another, forming a community that no longer needs the paternalistic aid offered by the male physician, theologian, warrior. In communities that are confined to one sex, such as the convent, the roles and duties prescribed for women and availability of education far exceeds the limits imposed on them by the outside world.

In Chapter Four, “Expressing Female Sexuality and Participating in Same Sex Affectivity,” I will discuss sexuality as it manifests in Marie de France’s *Lais* and Christine de Pizan’s *The Books of the City of Ladies*. Exploring this topic of female affectivity in the writings of Marie de France and Christine de Pizan naturally leads the reader out of the seclusion of Woolf’s room and into the inclusive female community spoken of by Christine.

Chapter Five, “Christine’s City of Ladies: The Seat of Female Affectivity,” guides the reader to Christine’s inclusive city of ladies: a gynocentric safe haven that allows “righteous” women a metaphoric community where they can escape from the slings and arrows of patriarchal culture. By joining forces and thus inducing gynocentricity, their female affectivity becomes solidified into a utopian community where creative power and healing emerges from women’s solidarity.

## **Chapter One: Locating Proto-Feminism**

It is not only appropriate, but essential to feminist studies that we give credit to the writers that subverted the dominant patriarchal culture of their time. When I use the terms “patriarchal culture,” “patriarchal hegemony,” or “the dominant ideology” I am primarily referring to the Medieval Christian tradition where a woman is subservient, at times portrayed as immoral and irrational, and inferior to men. This tradition was one where women were not valued either individually or collectively. In this tradition, in both life and literature, women were often portrayed negatively in terms of both intellect and sexuality.

What is the value of looking at two medieval women's works through a feminist lens? Is it always irresponsible to apply the term "feminist" onto an era where feminism itself did not exist? Karen Offen states:

Since 1900 historians and scholars of literary history, as well as contemporary commentators, have taken up the words "feminism" and "feminist," using them anachronistically and with great abandon, only rarely defining their terms or scrutinizing the full content of the ideas so labeled. In the first decade of the twentieth century, learned books and articles appeared on feminism in antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and especially in the period beginning in the seventeenth century.<sup>2</sup>

Although I understand the notions that Offen is asserting, I find it particularly important to understand the goals of feminist literary scholars. Term or no term, feminist literary scholars are examining ways in which women subverted the dominant ideologies of the time. Like Offen, I find the act of naming a powerful one, but I believe that the intentions behind scholars who use the term feminist to be noble and important. Therefore, I think it is essential to discuss what I mean by the term proto-feminism, as applied to the Middle Ages.

It is anachronistic to state that anyone, woman or man, prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century was a feminist, but it is possible that they still shared various feminist inclinations before the

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<sup>2</sup> Karen Offen. "Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach." *Signs* 1 (1988): 129-130.

movement or the term was developed. What I am suggesting is that there are instances in their works that are proto-feminist, in the sense that both Marie and Christine were drawing on an alternative and pro-woman literary tradition that sought not to demoralize and marginalize women, but to offer readers a female literary *corpus* that empowered women. Common themes are found throughout Marie de France's *Lais* and Christine de Pizan's *The Book of The City of Ladies* that actively and intentionally transgress the limits of patriarchal ideology. In this paper, I will not be applying contemporary feminist theories to the writing of Marie de France (1155-1190) and Christine de Pizan (1365-1430). I do not intend to assert that Marie de France and Christine de Pizan were feminists in any modern sense. However, common themes exist in Marie de France's *Lais* and Christine de Pizan's *The Book of The City of Ladies* that actively and intentionally transgress the limits of patriarchal ideology.

Though many assume the contrary, there *were* women writing in the Middle Ages and there were positive representations of women, but these positive representations were to be found on the periphery of society, emerging from a history of proto-feminism. This thesis will explore the following proto-feminist themes resonating throughout the above works: the defense and encouragement of a woman's education, woman as healer, positive expression of female sexuality, and finally same sex affectivity among women.

Proto-feminist medieval women writers acknowledged the patriarchal hegemony they were living in. To understand them, we must first comprehend the ideologies they were writing against. Howard Bloch describes them in his essay, "Medieval Misogyny":



The ritual denunciation of women constitutes something on the order of a cultural constant, reaching back to the Old Testament as well as to Ancient Greece and extending through the fifteenth century. Found in Roman tradition, it dominates ecclesiastical writing, letters, sermons, theological tracts, discussions and compilations of cannon law; scientific works, as part and parcel of biological, gynecological, and medical knowledge; and philosophy.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, Marie de France and Christine de Pizan's proto-feminist assertions were not to be seen as an easy task, seeing that, as Bloch relates, anti-woman sentiment held a powerful stronghold on medieval ideologies. In part, I am suggesting that Marie de France and Christine de Pizan make proto-feminist assertions by employing themes that actively acknowledge misogyny, allowing them to challenge the standards that patriarchy had set for medieval women.

Proto-feminists like Marie and Christine acknowledge, expose and evaluate the misogyny that pervades medieval literature. "The discourse of misogyny runs like a rich vein throughout the breadth of medieval literature. Like allegory itself.... it is peculiarly attracted, antifeminism is both a genre and a topos<sup>4</sup>." <sup>5</sup> The misogyny of the Middle Ages has its roots firmly planted in Christianity. It is important to understand the origins of misogyny. The Bible is fraught with misogynistic prescriptions and certainly wielded

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<sup>3</sup> Howard Bloch. "Medieval Misogyny." *Representations*. 20 (1987): 1.

<sup>4</sup> "This common introduction, usually served two purposes: The authors expressed a genuine, or, perhaps feigned concern about their ability to deal adequately with their subject both in terms of form and substance, and they preemptively tried to thwart any criticism on the part of the audience for any shortcomings in their work by beginning with this sort of *captatio benevolentiae*" (<http://www.reference-global.com/doi/abs/10.1515/BYZS.2004.521>)

<sup>5</sup> 1.

power and control over the lives of men and women in the Middle Ages. In the First Epistle of St. Paul to Timothy, St. Paul states:

I will therefore that men pray in every place, lifting up pure hands without anger and contention. In like manner women also in decent apparel: adorning themselves with modesty and sobriety, not with plaited hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly attire, But as it becometh women professing godliness with good works. Let the woman learn in silence, with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to use authority over man: but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed; then Eve. And Adam was not seduced; but the woman being seduced was in the transgression. Yet she shall be saved through childbearing: if she continue in faith, and love, and sanctification with sobriety. (1 Timothy 2:8-15)<sup>6</sup>

St. Paul is decidedly in favor of the disempowering women as active learners and normalizes his point of view by supporting and prescribing their subjugation. Moreover, according to him, a woman's knowledge is *never* equal to man's. Passages such as these laid the foundation of misogynistic thought upon which the patriarchal strongholds of the Middle Ages were built.

St. Paul was one among many architects of Christian thought who subscribed to this line of thinking, which led to medieval women being feared, particularly in terms of her sexuality. Woman was the cause of man's sin; woman's sexual temptations were so great that even though men were the dominant sex, her seductiveness would cause even the

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<sup>6</sup> "Douay-Rheims Catholic Bible with Search, Holy Scriptures." [DRBO.com](http://www.drbo.org/index.htm). 2004. . 5 November, 2008. <<http://www.drbo.org/index.htm>>

best of men to sin. Women should be mistrusted; if a woman leads, there will surely be a fall. This bolsters patriarchal structures by justifying from the beginning that it should be women following the lead of men and never the other way around. In his *Confessions*, Augustine writes:

3 (XI. 37) We must give consideration to the statement, 'And you shall be subject to your husband, and he shall rule over you', to see how it can be understood in the proper sense. For we must believe that even before her sin woman had been made to be ruled by her husband and to be submissive and subject by him. But we can with reason understand that the servitude meant in these words is that in which there is a condition similar to that of slavery rather than a bond of love (so that the servitude by which men later began to be slaves to other men obviously has its origin in punishment for sin). St Paul states, 'Through love serve one another.' But by no means would he say, 'Have dominion over one another.' Hence married persons though love can serve one another, but St Paul does not permit a woman to rule over a man. The sentence pronounced by God gave this power rather to man; and it is not by her nature but rather by her sin that woman deserved to have her husband for a master. But if this order is not maintained, nature will be corrupted more still, and sin will be increased.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Alcuin Blamires. *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. 79-80.

It was not only patristic authors who were responsible for laying the groundwork of misogyny; other male writers also subscribed to and promulgated antifeminist views. Christine criticized Jean de Meun, one of the authors of *The Romance of the Rose* in her “Debate on the Romance of the Rose”<sup>8</sup> because it not only negatively portrayed women, but valorized the victimization of women.

There is a wealth of literature showing medieval women displayed negatively, but negative opinions and claims about women were not universally accepted. Women such as Marie de France, Heloise, Christine de Pizan and Hildegard von Bingen were actively writing from a pro-woman or proto-feminist standpoint. However, it was not only women writers who wrote from a proto-feminist standpoint. Geoffrey Chaucer wrote in a tradition that was typically used by women and thus mainstreams this alternative literary tradition of the Middle Ages. His work continues to be controversial, causing exciting debates among scholars<sup>9</sup> who are searching for whether or not he intended to critique the oppression of medieval women, or remained intentionally ambiguous on the subject.

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<sup>8</sup> “Christine’s role was clearly defined: encourage men to live up to their own standards. In this way it was possible for her to write courtly love poetry, by distinguishing clearly between two types of love: *fol’amours* and *fin’amours*. *Fol’amours*, to her way of thinking, was being propagated in Jean de Meun’s continuation of Guillaume de Lorris’ otherwise estimable *Roman de la Rose*. For that reason she precipitated the first known literary quarrel in French literature, one that lasted from about 1398 or 1399 to about 1402, eventually involving the Chancellor of the University of Paris, the Queen of France, and a number of high state dignitaries” (Kelly 67).

<sup>9</sup> Daniel M. Murtaugh suggests that Chaucer oftentimes, as in “Chanticleer,” manages to have his characters be both sympathetic to women and misogynistic: “Clearly the rooster has it both ways. To his charming wife, with her seductive red-rimmed eyes, he presents the scented bouquet of the courtly compliment. At the same time, and in the same words, he retires to that medieval men’s club constituted by a knowledge of Latin and exchanges a hoary joke with St. Jerome and his allies against Jovinianus. The lines are a delight in themselves and arresting in their implications. For they take us through an underground tunnel between two medieval traditions separated by a conspicuous stone wall. On one side of the wall is a cloister and on the other a garden. On one side the cowed adherents of patristic antifeminism; on the other the carolers of the God of Love” (473).

Modern scholars can agree that his work acts as social criticism, particularly within *The Canterbury Tales* as we read of The Wife of Bath. Robert W. Hanning suggests:

He undertook not to idealize or attack, praise or blame women but to examine their situation in his society and specifically their adoption and rejection of the roles they were allowed or compelled to play there. In the case of the Wife of Bath, he also considered the possible response of a type of woman to a culture that denied her certain roles and reserved them for men.<sup>10</sup>

Recognizing Chaucer as a social critic moves him outside of the conventional patriarchal views of women. By evoking Chaucer, we can understand how a male writer, having male privilege, was able to mainstream certain exertions of proto-feminism in his writing. For Marie and Christine, they had a larger task at hand, make proto-feminist exertions while still adhering to the codes of medieval patriarchy.

## **Chapter 2: Marie de France's and Christine de Pizan's Defense of Education**

*I had no wish to enter had I the right, and this time the verger might have stopped me, demanding perhaps my baptismal certificate, or a letter from the Dean. But the Outside of these magnificent buildings is often as beautiful as the inside.*

*-Virginia Woolf<sup>11</sup>*

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<sup>10</sup> Robert W. Hanning. "From *Eva* and *Ave* to Eglentyne and Alisoun: Chaucer's Insight into the Roles Women Play." *Signs*. 3 (1977): 582.

<sup>11</sup> Virginia Woolf. *A Room of One's Own*. New York: Harcourt, 2005. 8.

Marie and Christine practice self-authorization, asserting to their readers that they are both women *and* writers, a transgressive concept in the High Middle Ages. Because women did not have access to education through the universities, they were often self-taught and therefore, at times, able to avoid the overwhelming influence of patriarchal thinkers such as St. Paul, St. Augustine, or literary successors such as Jean de Meun. Indeed, it is a result of this exclusion that women such as Marie and Christine were able to develop their own ideas, whether through self-teaching, oral tradition, or by obtaining an education in a convent, that led to the departure from conventional thinking that is evident in both women's writings. We must still bear in mind that some women who were educated in convents went on to express their ideas influenced by patriarchy<sup>12</sup>, since the convent was founded on patriarchal ideas. Rather than being indoctrinated by these patriarchal teachings, Marie and Christine used these voices, opinions, and viewpoints as the dialogical sparring partners needed to train them in defending their entire sex.

Marie and Christine encourage the intellectual potential in women, an issue that Chaucer examines. Chaucer does something similar to both Marie de France and Christine de Pizan. We find in him a male writer who was taking an honest look at the inequities medieval women faced. In the "The Wife of Bath's Prologue, Alisoun discusses the intellectual oppression that medieval women face. Here, Chaucer reveals The Wife's contempt for learned tradition or conventional male dominated education:

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<sup>12</sup>The order of St. Claire and Hildegard von Bingen certainly had rules designed for and by women, but the Church was founded on patriarchal rules.

The Wife's scorn for patriarchal "auctoritee" and male clerks is augmented by her suggestion that she is new clerk herself, with an "auctoritee" based on her experiences.<sup>13</sup> Chaucer was considering how intelligent women, such as the Wife, were denied the same benefits of men, such as education. "Tradition" as derived from classical or clerical institutions by tradition excluded women. The universities and clergy comprised a literate community so exclusively masculine that when Chaucer came to define the figure "woman writer," he made her the natural opponent of "clerks"<sup>14</sup>.

Like Chaucer, Marie de France and Christine de Pizan both embrace an alternative literary tradition, encouraging the education of women and encouraging women's intellectual potential. Marie and Christine were not only writing but writing in direct opposition to conventional medieval ideologies. Fourth Century church father Augustine discouraged the education of women by stating that Eve, unlike Adam, did not understand the concepts of God and was therefore in need of guidance. A remedy for all medieval women was to know and understand God but only through their husbands. Medieval society placed women under the tutelage of their husbands and fathers which resulted in limited avenues and filtered educations. Women were not able to develop their intellectual abilities beyond what their fathers or husbands would authorize. As a result, many times patriarchal Middle Ages showed little interest, indeed discouraged women's intellectualism. When this wasn't the case, it was the exception. Because women had no

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<sup>13</sup> Robert W. Hanning. "From *Eva* and *Ave* to Eglentyne and Alisoun: Chaucer's Insight into the Roles Women Play." *Signs*. 3 (1977): 594.

<sup>14</sup> Jennifer Summit. *Lost Property*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. 6.

access to university education, the choices available to the medieval female scholar were often either to take the veil or obtain an education in secret.

Women were barred from the university because of their sex and yet medieval women *did* have opportunities for alternative learning: “Women throughout the medieval period showed themselves adept at both teaching and learning outside the academy, absorbing all that Christian learning could offer and reinterpreting both traditional dogma and their experiences as women in their own educational writings.”<sup>15</sup> In medieval France, children of both sexes were educated together, learning Latin, arithmetic, and music.<sup>16</sup> And for much of the medieval period, convents provided a rich source of both learning and protection from anti-woman sentiment.<sup>17</sup> Shielding women from systems outside the convent that favored men enabled them to obtain an education and to learn in an environment that both uplifted and supported their education. Women benefited by having other learned women around them and learning from one another. While it may have, at times, been difficult to become a powerful, educated woman in the Middle Ages, there are a number of stalwart women in literature and life who were able to succeed in the Middle Ages largely due to pushing at the boundaries of normative medieval society.

Marie and Christine consciously equipped certain female characters with intelligence and wit and in so doing, they reveal the medieval woman as a complex, multifaceted

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<sup>15</sup> Carolyn Larrington. *Women and Writing in Medieval Europe*. London and New York: Routledge, 1995. 186.

<sup>16</sup> 188-189.

<sup>17</sup> 188.



individual. Rather than just resorting to a common convention of stating that the woman was smart and beautiful, they defend and promote women's education and intellectual potential. According to Tracy Adams, "The modern reader of medieval literature is trained by literary criticism to perceive "courtly" and "fabliau" ladies as type and anti-type, a perception reinforced by edited collections of romance and fabliaux, which present long stories singly and short ones in groups based upon genre."<sup>18</sup> By viewing women in such ways, medieval literary criticism of late has created narrow binaries and views from where it is difficult to observe anything other than the "courtly" and "anti-courtly" woman.<sup>19</sup> Here I wish to broaden our thinking of medieval women characters to include the possibility that both Marie and Christine wished to show their women characters as intelligent, actively and intentionally participating in proto-feminism and steering away from the medieval patriarchal concepts of women.

### **Presenting Marie**

Who was Marie de France?<sup>20</sup> The question frequently emerges from the mouths of scholars and for good reason; the details we have about her are obscure. The search for her identity has been an exciting topic and an example of unearthing and unveiling an

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<sup>18</sup> Tracy Adams. "Crossing Generic Boundaries: The Clever Courtly Lady." *Essays in Medieval Studies*. 21 (2004): 81.

<sup>19</sup> 81.

<sup>20</sup> According to Tilde Sankovitch, Marie "was obviously well-educated, which probably indicates a high birth, since she knew Latin as well as French and English, and was well versed in ancient and contemporary literature, as numerous allusions and borrowing in her work demonstrate. She probably was active in an Anglo-Norman courtly milieu, possibly the court of Henry II." (2).

important proto-feminist medieval writer. In the introduction to Marie de France's *Lais*, Robert Hanning and Joan Ferrante state:

Marie de France was perhaps the greatest woman author of the Middle Ages and certainly the finest medieval short fiction before Boccaccio and Chaucer....

Unfortunately, we know practically nothing about this superb storyteller, except for her name, her extant works (in addition to the *Lais*, a collection of animal fables and the moral, supernatural tale, *St. Patrick Purgatory*), the approximate period of her literary activities (1160?-1215?), and the fact, derived from her name and comments in her writings, that she was of French birth but wrote at or for the English court, which, as a result of the Norman Conquest, was French speaking in her days.<sup>21</sup>

Her writing is subversive in many ways. "Marie de France...active two centuries before Christine... formulated the problematics of the women writer, not only as the first to do so, but also in a basic way which is still useful in looking at women writers in general, and valid still today."<sup>22</sup> And like Chaucer, Marie can be seen as a social critic of her own time. According to Valerie Ross, "Marie constructs her own authorial identity and poetic agency as a female vernacular poet and a social critic, a spiritual being and a gendered,

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<sup>21</sup> Marie de France. *The Lais of Marie de France*. Ed. Joan M. Ferrante and Robert Hanning. Trans. Joan M. Ferrante and Robert Hanning. Grand Rapids, IA: Baker Academic, 1995. 1-2.

<sup>22</sup> Tilde Sankovitch. "The French Woman Writer in the Middle Ages: Staying Up Late." 1990. Northwestern University. 10 Oct. 2008. 2.  
<<http://www.luc.edu/publications/medieval/vol7/sankoi.html>>

desiring body, a participant in the cultural conventions of her time and a political visionary.”<sup>23</sup>

In her *Prologue* to the *Lais*, Marie announces her desires quite clearly:

Whoever has received knowledge / and eloquence in speech from God/ should not be silent or secretive/ but should demonstrate it willingly.<sup>24</sup>

Marie is stating that she, a woman, has received the gift of knowledge. “The word “knowledge in the first line is meant to catch our attention: Marie predicates of herself, a woman, attributes normally associate with men.”<sup>25</sup> As mentioned above, these attributes, among others, are intelligence and access to education. The “profession” of a woman writer in the Middle Ages was quite uncommon and indeed, associated with the male sex.

As discussed earlier, women were denied university education. However this did not mean that women were uneducated. Women were educated orally (as were men), in convents, or self-taught. Indeed, the term “education” itself is one that is controversial. If we are speaking of university education then, it is true, medieval women were barred from this. Even beyond that women of the upper class and particularly the peasant class passed down tales, medical advice, practical advice, etcetera, orally, which is another form important to be cognizant of when defining “education.”

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<sup>23</sup> Valerie Ross. “Transgressive Alliances: Marie de France and the Representation of Female Desire in *Eliduc*.” *Medievalia*. 21.2. (1997): 209-230.

<sup>24</sup> Marie de France. *Lais*. ll.1-4.

<sup>25</sup> Benjamin Semple. “The Male Psyche and the Female Sacred Body in Marie de France and Christine de Pizan.” *Yale French Studies*. 86 (1994): 172.

The oral tradition is particularly significant in Marie's *Lais*. In her "Prologue" Marie announces, "then I thought of the *lais* I'd heard. / I did not doubt, indeed I knew well, that those who first began them/ and sent them forth/ composed them in order to preserve/ adventures they had heard./ I have heard many told;/ and I don't want to neglect or forget them./ To put them into word and rhyme/ I've often stayed awake."<sup>26</sup> Marie feels a responsibility to write down these tales that she has heard. Oral tales are perhaps similar to the fairy tales of contemporary Western culture that had been told again and again, morphing in certain ways. Marie wanted to capture these oral tales and write them down to preserve them, in the way she heard them, forever. And indeed, this is precisely what happened. While her claims of hearing them may have been a literary device and an example of self-authorization, one can certainly glean from this statement the importance of not letting a tale fade. According to Jerry Root, "The 'Prologue and the *Lais* do... explicitly pursue the theme of self-expression and self-representation: 'ainz se deit voluntiers mustrer'" ("Prologue" 4). And yet, her stories clearly derive from other stories— "Des *lais* pensai, k'oiz aveie" ["Then I thought of the *lais* I'd heard"] ("Prologue" 33).<sup>27</sup> Marie thought these tales, whether she heard them or not, important enough to preserve. Moreover, the fact that she holds the oral tradition in high esteem is an important point. The oral tradition is one that has long been used by persons of lower classes and therefore, she honors this tradition by preserving these *lais*. Ross adds:

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<sup>26</sup> Marie de France. *Lais*. ll. 33-42.

<sup>27</sup> Jerry Root. "Courtly Love and the Representation of Women in the *Lais* of Marie de France and the *Costumes de Beauvaisis* of Philippe de Beaumanoir." 57. (2003): 18.

Marie's *Lais* represent a radical fusion of several literary traditions, genres, and lineages, consistently interweaving the dominant with the marginal, and yet – as argues by Eva Rosenn – ultimately privileging the subordinate term. Rosenn writes, “She privileges the *conte* over the *estoire*, the oral over the written, the *lai* over the *romaunz*, the Breton/Celtic over the *translation imperii*, the vernacular over the Latin...” Even so, both terms coexist simultaneously, forming an alliance that transgresses all hegemonic codes of canonical convention, profoundly disrupting the dominant paradigm of “division and rejection that prescribes discourse” (Rosenn 228).”<sup>28</sup>

While Marie's use of the modesty topos read so often in the introductions of medieval writer's works is indeed contained within the “Prologue” as she presents her *Lais* to the King: “If it pleases you to receive them,/ you will give me great joy;/ I shall be happy forever./ Do not think me presumptuous/ if I dare present them to you,”<sup>29</sup> it is far less self-disparaging than how other medieval women writers present their works. In Marie's case, her “deferral,” as Jerry Root calls it, seems to serve an even higher purpose than merely authorizing herself to write:

Her deferral of authority is typically medieval, but it also seems ideal for a marginal, female voice. She uses this deferral to put herself in a position of impunity that facilitates the break into language. She will speak, indeed “show

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<sup>28</sup> Valerie Ross. “Transgressive Alliances: Marie de France and the Representation of Female Desire in *Eliduc*.” *Medievalia*. 21.2. (1997): 213.

<sup>29</sup> Marie de France. *Lais*. ll. 51-55.

herself” by speaking and writing, but this whole project deflects away from her as narrator because she has heard from someone else... the self-diminishing status of the narrative persona is thus conveniently characteristic of the medieval anxiety of authorship. That status nicely suits the female persona’s break into language.<sup>30</sup>

In other words, in what seems like an act of self-deprecation, Marie strengthens and validates her writing. Moreover, her deferral continues to be undone as Sankovitch states:

The naming of God—“Deus”—... is how she names, metonymically, what she lucidly perceives as her intellectual and artistic endowment in writing. “Deus” makes possible and even mandatory the coincidence between desire and duty, and Marie’s invention of that perfect coincidence resolves what is often a fundamental conflict for the woman writer. Her association with “Deus,” the supreme author, authorizes her.<sup>31</sup>

Naming herself is important for Marie, particularly for self-identification. In the first *Lai*, “Guigemar”: “Listen, my lords, to the words of Marie...”<sup>32</sup> (line 2). A few lines later, she identifies herself as *herself*, that of the female sex: “People should praise anyone/ who wins admiring comments for herself” (lines 5-6). She is not only identifying herself as *female*, but is also naming the female sex as one that should be praised for their accomplishments, in this case, Marie’s own collection of tales. Marie names herself at the

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<sup>30</sup> Jerry Root. “*Courtly Love*.” 18.

<sup>31</sup> Tilde Sankovitch. “The French Woman Writer.” 7.

<sup>32</sup> Marie de France. *Lais*. l. 2.

beginning of the first *lai*, at the end of the *Purgatory*, and at the end of the *Fables*, in the latter case assertively:

I shall name myself so it will be remembered;

Marie is my name, I am of France.

It may be that many clerks

will take my labor on themselves.

I don't want any of them to claim it.<sup>33</sup>

Clearly, acknowledgement and identity are important to Marie and particularly, her *female* identity. Not only was Marie exerting the proto-feminist ideals of self-authorization, she was also concerned that a male was going to take credit for her works. Therefore, by naming herself as the author, she is practicing female self-authorization stating that we are to remember her name and to acknowledge that it was an intelligent *woman* who wrote these works. Michelle Freeman adds:

This initiative of the poet-narrator is all the more arresting not only because it is a woman who dares to address her male interlocutor first—an act often judged immodest, or uncourtly, in the twelfth century romance tradition—but also because the person addressed is the King, namely, a dignitary to be spoken to only if he so requests. Marie herself emphasizes the boldness of her gesture in the closing lines of the General Prologue: Do not think me brazen/ If I dare to make you this gift./ Now listen to the beginning. (lines 54-56)<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Marie de France. *Lais*. 6

<sup>34</sup> Michelle Freeman. "Marie de France's Poetics of Silence: The Implications for a Feminine

For herself and her characters, identity remains an important subject throughout Marie's *Lais*; her representation of intelligent women, thus her encouragement of intellectual potential, is also pervasive in tales such as "Yonec."<sup>35</sup>

From the beginning Marie describes the main female character in "Yonec" as being intelligent: "The girl who was given to the rich man/ came from a good family;/ she was wise, gracious and very beautiful—/ for her beauty he loved her very much."<sup>36</sup> The girl is "given" to "the rich man" because he is old and does not have a male heir. It is important here that Marie describes the girl as being both intelligent and beautiful. Adams reveals "Within the "courtly"/ "anti-courtly" schema, only the "anti-courtly" can accommodate cleverness as a positive trait."<sup>37</sup> Here we see a courtly woman who is courtly *and* intelligent, so her wisdom is a surprising addition.

However, the oppressive husband does not value her wisdom; he is only interested in her beauty and the expectation that her body will be a vessel for his male heir. As the tale progresses, the woman is so miserable that she lets her beauty fade: "The lady lived in great sorrow,/ with tears and sighs and weeping;/ she lost her beauty,/ as one does who cares nothing for it."<sup>38</sup> What is perhaps most striking in the *lai* terms of the women's stated wisdom versus her beauty, the trait valued by her old, jealous husband, is that the

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Translatio." *PMLA*. 5(1984): 860.

<sup>35</sup> In this *lai*, a lady is locked in a tower by her jealous older husband and is tormented by loneliness. She prays for a lover who comes to her window in the form of a bird. The jealous husband discovers this and places spikes on the window to kill the lover. The lover lands on the spikes and receives a fatal wound. He about the murder and the son would avenge his death. The day comes and it is revealed the old jealous slays his stepfather. The lady and son are then forever revered.

<sup>36</sup> Marie de France. *Lais*. ll. 21-24.

<sup>37</sup> Tracy Adams. "Crossing Generic Boundaries." 83.

<sup>38</sup> Marie de France. *Lais*. ll.45-48.



character who only prizes the women's beauty, and not her intelligence, is punished and killed at the end of the *lai*. She asks God to bring her the partner of her imaginings, which occurs in the form of a hawk turned man who is a prince from a nearby land. Her jealous husband finds out and set spikes up in the tower where he has imprisoned her, which kill the Prince, but not before the Lady has become pregnant with the Prince's child. In the end, the Lady waits until their son is almost grown before revealing the truth of the paternity of her child. Here, too, we are shown that the Lady bears wisdom. She waits many years before revealing the truth and states it at precisely the right moment. Because of her intelligence and wisdom, she is eventually unchained from her jealous husband.

A similar scenario takes place in "Guigemar."<sup>39</sup> Again, Marie stresses the lady in the tale is "A woman of high lineage,/ noble, courteous, beautiful, *intelligent* (my italics)..."<sup>40</sup> Once more, the jealous husband imprisons her "to keep his wife under

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<sup>39</sup> Guigemar is a young man who is stricken with the inability to love. While out hunting, his arrow ricochets off a stag, mortally wounding the stag and stabbing him in the thigh. As the stag dies, she reveals to Guigemar that the only one who can heal him is a woman who loves him. A boat takes him on an unexpected journey to a land where a woman is under close eye of her jealous husband. The lady is given a maid, her only companion, to serve her. Both the lady and the maid find Guigemar as his ship lands and secretly takes him in. Guigemar and the Lady fall in love and the Lady states that should their love be discovered and she dies, Guigemar should love another woman. The Lady ties a knot in Guigemar's shirt stating, "You have my leave to love the woman,/ whoever she may be,/ who will be able to undo it (Hanning and Ferrante 46-47). She, on the other hand, vows to wear a belt "tightened about her flanks./ Whoever could open the buckle/ without breaking it or severing it from the belt,/ would be the one he would urge her to love" (572-574). The lovers are caught and the Lady is imprisoned and Guigemar is sent back on his ship. Guigemar reaches his native land where many women try to undo the knot to no avail. The Lady escapes through an unlocked door and finds the ship at the shore. She wishes for death but the ship takes her to a castle ruled by Meriaduc. Meriaduc loves the lady but the lady is still in love with Guigemar. Meriaduc tells her about the man he knows is in a similar predicament and has the shirt tied in a knot. Meriaduc tries to unfasten the lady's belt to no avail. Meriaduc brings Guigemar to his castle, but Guigemar is convinced that the lady is not *his* lady, but merely resembles her and doesn't believe it is her until she unties his shirt. He then unbuckles her belt and defies Meriaduc by galloping away with her, declaring war on Meriaduc and finally killing him (Marie de France 30-55).

<sup>40</sup> Marie de France. *Lais*. ll.211-212.

guard.”<sup>41</sup> The husband imprisons her because he not only mistrusts her, he also wishes to keep that which is his property, reducing the woman to a material possession and subduing those traits which empower her, such as intelligence.

The lady’s maid, referred to in the *lai* as the girl, is presented as erudite: “Her husband had given her/ a girl to serve her, one who was noble and well educated....”<sup>42</sup> Marie makes it a point to convey to her readers that this is an intelligent maid which suggests not only the importance of a smart woman, but that an intelligent lady is provided with an educated maid. Here we can see what Marie is doing as opposed to other writers. She keeps drawing our attention to intelligent and/or educated women. The maid is presented as wise again when Guigemar approaches her for advice on what to do about his for her lady, “Advise me dear friend!/ What should I do about my passion?”/ The girl very sweetly comforted the knight/ promised to help him/ in every way she could;/ she was very good-hearted and well bred.”<sup>43</sup> The male character is asking a female maid for advice which indicates that the male trusts the intelligent advice of a female character, thereby dismantling the patriarchal hierarchy that is so often found in medieval texts.

### Christine’s City

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<sup>41</sup> 231.

<sup>42</sup> Marie de France. *Lais*. ll.246-248.

<sup>43</sup> 458-464.

Christine de Pizan<sup>44</sup>, in her *The Book of the City of Ladies*, written in 1405, also shows examples of wise, intelligent, and witty women to Christine, as she laments the status of women and that if such intelligent men are berating women, the learned men must be speaking the truth:

It would be impossible that so many famous men—such solemn scholars, possessed of such deep and great understanding, so clear-sighted in all things, as it seemed—could have spoken falsely on so many occasions that I could hardly find a book on morals where, even before I had read it in its entirety, I did not find several chapters or certain sections attacking women, no matter who the author was. This reason alone, in short, made me conclude that, although my intellect did not perceive my own great faults and, likewise, those of other women because of its simpleness and ignorance, it was however truly fitting that such was the case. And so I relied more on the judgment of others than on what I myself felt and knew. I was so transfixed in this line of thinking for such a long time that it seemed as if I were in a stupor. Like a gushing fountain, a series of authorities, whom I recalled one after another, came to mind, along with their opinions on this

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<sup>44</sup> “Christine de Pizan, the first professional writer in Europe, was born in Venice around 1364. Her father, Thomas of Pizan, came originally from Pizzano, a small town near Bologna. He was a well-known physician and astrologer whose fame caused him to be appointed to the court of the French king Charles V. He left Italy when Christine was still an infant, and his family followed him in 1368... The fortunes of Christine’s family depended on the benevolence of the king who was a patron of the arts and fostered an intense intellectual life at his court” (Blumenfeld-Kosinski xi). Christine’s position was a privileged one, having had connections to the court, her writings were undoubtedly promoted and respected more than a woman without these associations.

topic. And I finally decided that God formed a vile creature when He made woman....”<sup>45</sup>

Christine takes the medieval modesty topos even further by stating that if so many male scholars say it is true, then woman must indeed be the way that most medieval texts present her: a temptress, of loose morals, and deservedly beneath men on the medieval hierarchy. Christine is deprecating all women, including herself, as *City* begins. This is a strategy she uses so that when she has her vision she is able to employ Reason, Rectitude, and Justice to tell her why she and the many medieval misogynistic texts and thinkers are wrong:

She uses examples of extraordinary, indeed superhuman women... sometimes against their own misogyny, but within setting she has created, a universal history of fortune's effects of the building of a city of ladies, and from the mouths and under the control of female personifications who have higher authority than human authority but are sometimes only thinly disguised stand-ins for her.<sup>46</sup>

Christine laments being born a woman, but *The Book of the City of Ladies* praises women's intellect and shows, by examples, just how intelligent women can be. Susan Groag Bell states that *Ladies*, “exudes her admiration of literate and studious women.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Christine de Pizan. *The Book of the City of Ladies*. Trans. Earl Jeffrey Richards. New York: Persea Books, 1998. 4-5

<sup>46</sup> Joan M. Ferrante. *To the Glory of Her Sex*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997. 204.

<sup>47</sup> Susan Groag Bell. “Christine de Pizan (1364-1430): Humanism and the Problem of a Studious Woman.” 3/4 (1976): 176.

Christine wonders if God has ever given “the feminine sex... the privilege of the virtue of high understanding and great learning, and whether women ever have a clever enough mind for this,” and continues, “I wish very much to know because men maintain that the mind of women can learn only a little.”<sup>48</sup> Reason asks Christine, “Do you know why women know less?”<sup>49</sup> Christine uses rhetoric masterfully. By asking questions, she then can provide answers and it *appears* as though Christine is seeking knowledge, yet her readers can glean that this is multilayered: Christine possesses knowledge and is providing answers and granting knowledge to a questioning “Christine.” Earl Jeffrey Richards adds that “Christine’s task in *The Book of the City of Ladies* is to transform her own erudition into an emblem of women’s potential for erudition, a task which, it hardly needs to be said, she brilliantly succeeds.”<sup>50</sup>

Christine replies to Reason, “Not unless you tell me, my lady,” to which Reason says: “Without the slightest doubt, it is because they are not involved in many different things, but stay at home, where there is enough for them to run the household and there is nothing which so instructs a reasonable creature as the exercise and experience of many different things.”<sup>51</sup> Not only is Christine exerting proto-feminist assertions in terms of her promotion of women’s intellect and education, but she is also commenting that women were given an enormous task of running a household. This is acknowledgment of the

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<sup>48</sup> Christine de Pizan. *The Book of the City of Ladies*. Trans. Earl Jeffrey Richards. New York: Persea Books, 1998. 63.

<sup>49</sup> 63.

<sup>50</sup> xxxii.

<sup>51</sup> 63.

value of a women's job and, to take this idea a bit further, after a hard day's work of household duties, there is neither time, nor energy for education.

At this point in the text, Reason provides concrete examples of intelligent and wise women and such as Sappho:

'Sappho, possessed sharp wit and burning desire for constant study in the midst of bestial and ignorant men, frequented the heights of Mount Parnassus, that is, of perfect study. Thanks to her fortunate boldness and daring, she kept company with the Muses, that is, the arts and sciences, without being turned away. She entered the forest of laurel trees filled with many boughs, greenery, and different colored flowers, soft fragrances and various aromatic spices, where Grammar, Logic, noble Rhetoric, Geometry, and Arithmetic live and take their leisure... From what Boccaccio<sup>52</sup> says about her, it should be inferred that the profundity of both her understanding and of her learned books can only be known and understood by men of great perception and learning, according to the testimony of the ancients.<sup>53</sup>

Sappho is, in other words, a woman of great intellect who can only be understood by learned men. Christine positions her among uneducated men of her time and shows that she has risen above them and devotedly educated herself. She is of higher value than

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<sup>52</sup> "Christine turned to the work of a male writer for her source, Boccaccio's *De Claris Mulieribus*. The relationship between the two writers is complicated by Christine's paradoxical reliance on Boccaccio's text, and his authority as a male author, in her attempt to refute the traditional representations of women by male authors and write a history of women from her unique and revolutionary perspective as a woman" (Phillippy 329). Although Boccaccio was indeed of the male sex, his *On Famous Women* was a momentous work of the time and quite influential to proto-feminist thinkers such as Christine de Pizan. (Phillippy 329).

<sup>53</sup> 67.

“bestial” men. Moreover, Christine places her above even educated men of the Middle Ages, as her work is of such value that men must achieve a high level of intellectual sophistication before they are able to study and understand her. Christine would be happy to know that Sappho is still revered as an important poet.

Christine’s proto-feminist representation of learned women is unique in her period, not only in the methodical methods she uses, e.g. using herself as main character who is convinced of various women intellects because she represents herself, in her capacity as the main character and narrator, as someone who knows that women have historically been both learned and intellectually gifted, but because Christine is writing this conveying this to a predominately educated male audience. Sandra L. Hindman adds:

A look at works of the period, discussing and characterizing women, suggests just how novel she was. For example, in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century France: “Women should not learn to read or write unless they are going to be nuns, as much harm comes from such knowledge” or “If you have a female child, set her to sewing and not to reading, for it is not suitable for a female to know how to read unless she is going to be a nun” or “The female is an empty thing and easily swayed.” In the light of such remarks, Christine’s accomplishments must be regarded as considerable, and a work like the *Cité des dames* that unreservedly praises women emerges as exceptional among the literary production of the day.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Sandra L. Hindman. “With Ink and Mortar: Christine De Pizan’s “Cité des Dames.” *Feminist Studies*. 10 (1984): 460.

Christine is a staunch advocate of women's education and learning. Earl Jeffrey Richards adds, "Christine insisted that women must be educated. These... facts alone make Christine revolutionary. Her attitude was profoundly feminist in that it involved complete dedication to the betterment of women's lives and to the alleviation of their suffering."<sup>55</sup> Earl Jeffrey Richards is commenting on similar proto-feminist themes that I find in Christine's work. In *The City of Ladies*, she posits that women may be physically frailer than men, but that this only sharpens their minds.<sup>56</sup> As Chaucer was a social critique of his time, Christine continues, deliberately or not, his method and expands it, producing a proto-feminist critique that defends women's intellect in a manner that is transgressive for the time. Natalie Zemon Davis, in the forward to an English translation of *The Book of the City of Ladies*, elaborates, "Where there is observed difference between men and women in knowledge, invention, and activity, it is due to differences in education and to conventional role allocation. If it were the custom to send girls to school, they would know as much as men."<sup>57</sup>

Christine's advocacy of women's intellect and learning in many ways prefigures that of her successor, Virginia Woolf, who, in her essay *A Room of One's Own* reiterates the idea that women lack the male privilege of university education. Virginia Woolf states this idea again in *Three Guineas*: "Perhaps the greatest testimony to the value of education... is the fact that the sisters of educated men not only made the sacrifices of

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<sup>55</sup> Christine de Pizan. *The Book of the City of Ladies*. Trans. Earl Jeffrey Richards. New York: Persea Books, 1998. xxxii.

<sup>56</sup> 63.

<sup>57</sup> xx.



comfort and pleasure, which were needed in order to educate their brothers, but actually desired to be educated themselves.”<sup>58</sup>

Like Virginia Woolf, Christine ensures that we are aware of the women who desired education. Christine, through the voice of Reason, introduces the Roman maiden Cornificia:

Cornificia, the noble maiden was sent to school by her parents along with her brother Cornificus when they were both children, thanks to deception and trickery. This little girl so devoted herself to study and with such marvelous intelligence that she began to savor the sweet taste of knowledge acquired through study... She occupied herself with this for such a long period of time that she became a consummate poet, and she was not only extremely brilliant and expert in the learnedness and craft of poetry but also seemed to have been nourished with the very milk and teaching of perfect philosophy, for she wanted to hear and know about every branch of learning which she then mastered so thoroughly that she surpassed her brother.<sup>59</sup>

Christine shows us a woman whose desire, we can assume by hiding her sex, was so strong to learn that she practiced deception in order to obtain an education. Christine also mentions here that Cornificia’s knowledge and passion for learning surpassed her brother’s. These statements directly oppose the medieval ideologies of the day that barred women from the same access to education as a men. Even if she were permitted,

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<sup>58</sup> Virginia Woolf. *A Room of One’s Own*: New York: Harcourt, 2005. 33.

<sup>59</sup> Christine de Pizan. *City of Ladies*. 64.

pervading thought was that she did not have the mental faculties to achieve the same level of knowledge. As we can see, Christine was not of this opinion and uses *The Book of the City of Ladies* to assert her proto-feminist stance that women were more than capable of desiring to learn and, at times, taking great risks for the opportunity.

In the section entitled, “Against Those Men Who Claim it is not Good For Women to be Educated,” Christine says to Rectitude: “I am amazed by the opinion of some men who claim that they do not want their daughters, wives, or kinswomen to be educated because their mores would be ruined as a result.”<sup>60</sup> This is a perfect moment for Christine to utilize her rhetorical strategy: claiming to be amazed by certain men allows her to answer her own incredulity. Using the voice of Rectitude, she states, “Here you can clearly see that not all opinions of men are based on reason and *that these men are wrong* [My Italics]... How could anyone think or believe that whoever follows good teaching or doctrine is the worse for it?”<sup>61</sup> Here Christine is stating that the teaching must be moralistic, here she aligns herself, as she often does in *City of Ladies* and as Marie de France and many other medieval women writers also did, with God.

### **Chapter 3: Healing Guigemar and the City of Ladies**

*And yet, I continued, approaching the bookcase again, where shall I find that elaborate study of the psychology of women by a woman? If through their incapacity to play football women are not going to be allowed to practice medicine——*  
-Virginia Woolf<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> 153.

<sup>61</sup> 153.

<sup>62</sup> Virginia Woolf. *A Room of One's Own*. New York: Harcourt, 2005. 77.

Women are called to healing for different reasons, one being that women wish to heal other women. Women do not only have the desire to heal, but often possess the healing that comes from the wounds which are received from living in a patriarchal culture. Women also bond with other women differently than they bond with men. Marie and Christine take on the task of showing women as healers and women healing other women. The fact that a woman was not necessarily encouraged to be a healer did not mean that women were excluded from the profession. Trotula, real life medieval female physician from Salerno, was respected for her medical knowledge and authority. She is remembered for having authored a circulated medical book. Although there is some debate, Trotula was largely accepted as female.<sup>63</sup> At times, in fact, women were the sex largely responsible for healing and medical practice:

In Rome much of the gynecological work appears to have been done by women. Some of these women were midwives (*obstetrices*), others were given full acknowledgement as doctors (*medicae*). .... In the fifth century, Theodorus Priscianus dedicated the third book of a medical treatise to Salvina, addressing her as the gentle servant of his art. In the sixth century, a Greek physician, Aetios of Amida, writing on women's diseases and childbearing in his *Tetrabiblon*, quoted extensively from one Aspasia. Aspasia has been variously identified as the beautiful Phoenician mistress of Cyrus the Younger and of Artaxerxes, and as the Athenian

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<sup>63</sup> While scholars sometimes speculate Trotula's sex, I will refer to Trotula as "she." "The connotations of *trot*, already proverbial in the Middle Ages, are too suggestive to be ignored. A *trot* was a *vielle*. She trotted for a living. Deprived of physical attractions by age, she had the wisdom of a sorceress, and in her business as procuress, she taught her protégées the tricks of the trade" (Rowland, Beryl 4).

courtesan who dominated Pericles.<sup>64</sup>

It was not unusual for women in the Middle Ages to have practiced medicine especially in midwifery. Here, women were the preferred sex of the profession. While midwives attended to the physical corpus, Marie and Christine helped to bring forth a literary corpus. Healing can take place metaphorically and can exist both in terms of mind and body. The authority that attached to the image of physician is now transferred metaphorically to the works of Marie and Christine.

Probably the *lai* which contains the most examples of a woman's power to heal is *Guigemar*. "In *Guigemar*, the female body is gifted with healing and talismanic qualities."<sup>65</sup> In addition, a female takes an active role in both the knowledge of Guigemar's condition (his inability to love) and the solution and cure. When Guigemar goes hunting, he observes a hind and her fawn. Guigemar aims at the hind and his arrow ricochets off her breastbone, fatally injuring her and penetrating his thigh. The injured hind cries:

Alas! I'm dying!/ And you, vassal, who wounded me,/ this be your destiny:/ may  
you never get medicine for your wound!/ Neither herb nor root,/ neither physician  
nor potion,/ will cure you/ of that wound in your thigh, until a woman heals you,/  
one who will suffer, out of love for you,/ pain and grief such as no woman ever

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<sup>64</sup> Rowland Beryl. *Medieval Woman's Guide to Health: The First Gynecological Handbook*. Kent: The Kent State University Press, 1981. 2-3.

<sup>65</sup> Benjamin Semple. "The Male Psyche and the Female Sacred Body in Marie de France and Christine de Pizan." *Yale French Studies*. 86 (1994): 174.

suffered before./ And out of love for her, you'll suffer as much...<sup>66</sup>

While Guigemar needs healing for his physical wound, Marie also informs us that he has always had an emotional wound/illness: "But in forming him nature had so badly erred/ that he never gave any thought to love./ There wasn't a lady or maid on earth,/ no matter how noble or how beautiful,/ who wouldn't have willingly granted him her love,/ had he asked her for it."<sup>67</sup> In fact, it isn't only love that will cure him. He needs to "be cured of this wound by the women who will suffer as much for him as he will suffer for her."<sup>68</sup>

Guigemar is in need of healing in two ways: for his inability to love and for the wound in his thigh. It is indeed a woman who cures both maladies, Marie elevates women above men in this instance and transgresses conventional medieval ideologies by giving a woman power and agency that both teaches and heals him through a woman's nurturing and love. She is doing a similar thing here by stressing a woman's ability to heal that she does in Yonec, a metaphorical mind/body healing.

When Guigemar reaches the port, both women think he has died, but the lady "put her hand on his breast,/ and felt that it was warm, and his heart healthy,/ beating beneath his ribs."<sup>69</sup> Benjamin Semple suggests:

The Lady's body possesses miraculous healing powers for Guigemar. When she and her servant, a maiden, find Guigemar unconscious on the ship, the Lady lays

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<sup>66</sup> Marie de France. *The Lais of Marie de France*. Ed. Joan M. Ferrante and Robert Hanning. Trans. Joan M. Ferrante and Robert Hanning. Grand Rapids, IA: Baker Academic, 1995. 33.

<sup>67</sup> 56-62.

<sup>68</sup> Benjamin Semple. "The Male Psyche and the Female Sacred Body in Marie de France and Christine de Pizan." *Yale French Studies*. 86 (1994): 174.

<sup>69</sup> Marie de France. *Lais*. 379-381.

her hand upon his heart, and he awakens. The wound in his thigh is soon healed, but is replaced by another wound, this one more metaphorical: a wound in the heart for, as the narrator says, “Love is an invisible wound inside the body, and since it has its source in Nature, it is a long-lasting ill.”<sup>70</sup>

As mentioned previously, in the Middle Ages, a woman’s body was at times vilified, so for Marie to suggest a lay female body has the capacity to heal is a novel and transgressive assertion. Moreover, Marie is connecting a lay female’s body to the saintly woman’s body which *did* have the capacity to heal. This is how Marie is writing differently from her contemporaries. Although the lady’s body is what houses the power, it is not only her physicality that possesses healing powers but the lady’s entire self, mind, and body that entirely and wholly heals Guigemar. After he learns to (and realizes he can) love the lady, he states that his very life is dependent upon whether or not the lady will love him: “If she refuses my plea,/ shows herself so proud and scornful,/ then I’ll have to die of grief,/ languishing forever in this pain.”<sup>71</sup> While typically the male would be in the power position, Marie de France challenges this by presenting the lady as the one who possesses power and, most importantly here, the power to heal. “Stripped of his social context and wounded, Guigemar is pushed to an effort that he might not otherwise have made.”<sup>72</sup> This effort is permitting a woman to heal him both physically

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<sup>70</sup> Benjamin Semple. “Male Psyche.” 175.

<sup>71</sup> Marie de France. *Lais*. ll. 403-406.

<sup>72</sup> Benjamin Semple. “Male Psyche.” 175.

and emotionally. This is a kind of inversion typical of courtly love, but Marie shows a lay lady performing a mind, body and soul healing.

For Christine de Pizan, the sense of healing in *The Book of the City of Ladies* is more all-encompassing than those of Marie de France. Christine set out to dismantle the misogynistic assumptions that medieval society had toward women. In addition, she wished to heal women's emotional and spiritual damage. She did not want the misogynistic attitudes such as those in *The Romance of the Rose* to continue to plague women's minds to the point where they themselves believed the gross misrepresentations that were continually thrust upon them and embedded into every day life.

Christine's city is allegorical in the very production of the work. The metaphorical city represents a bold attempt at healing and protecting past and future women from the "villains" of society who have physically, emotionally, or spiritually denounced or wounded them. Here, at least theoretically, Christine has masterfully "built" a place of healing and protection, where *all* reputable women can find safe haven. Indeed, intentionally creating an allegorical city is one of the ways in which she claims authority.

A method to heal women is presented when the topic of rape is introduced by Christine. I introduce rape to cast a light on the opinions on rape by influential medieval men, such as Augustine<sup>73</sup> and Jean de Meung as well as medieval laws. The need for

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<sup>73</sup> While not stating that women enjoy being raped, "Augustine presents rape as an agent of humility, in that it counters pride, actual and potential, in women: "illarum tumori succursum est immanenti, istarum occursum est immanenti ('The former were treated for a tumour already swollen; the latter for a tumour ready to swell', I, xxviii, 120-21). This statement is oddly reversed by the later theologians who argue that those raped should not become too proud of their suffering, a reversal that perhaps stems from the image of heroic saints threatened by rape" (Saunders 160).

healing and protection is keenly felt when Christine evokes the claim that women enjoy being raped:

Then I, Christine, spoke as follows, “My lady, I truly believe what you are saying that there are plenty of beautiful women who are virtuous and chaste and who know how to protect themselves well from the entrapments of deceitful men. I am therefore troubled and grieved when men argue that many women want to be raped and that it does not bother them at all to be raped even when they verbally protest. It would be hard to believe that such villainy is actually pleasant for them.”<sup>74</sup>

Christine reacts to assertions that rape is a common way of damaging women. As Corinne Saunders reminds us in her work *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England* that we must be cautious of revisionisms even when discussing rape. Still we must not go to the other extreme and look at the term “rape” in an anesthetic fashion.<sup>75</sup> Rape has a history of being used as a method of control and power. Women not only endured the violent act, but the courts dismissed her if she conceived:

The court not only took pains to verify, as law required, whether rape had in fact been committed but even where there was no doubt as to the fact, there was a suspicion that the woman had enjoyed the act... In England in the thirteenth century, judges would dismiss a charge of rape brought by a woman if she conceived as a result. This was because, according to the medieval concept of a woman’s sexual and physiological nature, she needed to secrete a certain seed to

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<sup>74</sup> Christine de Pizan. *City of Ladies*. 160-161.

<sup>75</sup> Corinne Saunders. *Rape and Ravishment in Literature*. New York: D.S. Brewer, 2001. 2.



enable her to conceive, and this did not happen unless she was sexually satisfied.

Pregnancy meant that she had enjoyed the rape and had no right to press charges.<sup>76</sup>

Rectitude answers Christine: “Rest assured, dear friend, chaste ladies who live honestly take absolutely no pleasure in being raped. Indeed, rape is the greatest possible sorrow for them. Many upright women have demonstrated that this is true with their own credible examples, just like Lucretia.”<sup>77</sup> <sup>78</sup> Christine fights against the men who use women for their sexual pleasure, ruin women’s chastity, and then claim that women have enjoyed the act. Christine’s explanation and defense of women here is multilayered. Rape can be viewed as a method of control and power over women. Christine wishes her city to be a place where women who have been raped can be safe. Christine feels it is necessary to ameliorate not only the general and pervasive thought throughout the Middle Ages that women enjoyed rape, but to also send a message to other women that rape is not something that women have ever enjoyed. The city will be a place of refuge and healing where women who have been raped can exist and is a place where women who have been disturbed by the very suggestion that women do, and in fact *should*, find rape pleasurable. By creating a metaphorical sanctuary in which women are supported and revered, that upholds and reveres women, Christine de Pizan has participated in an act of proto-feminism: elevating women and proving example after example, that the

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<sup>76</sup> Shulamith Shahar. *The Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages*. New York: Routledge, 2003. 17.

<sup>76</sup> Lucretia is a Roman woman who was renowned for her chastity and virtue. In 509 BC, she was threatened and then raped by the King’s son. She told of the violent deed and then, unable to continue on, killed herself.

<sup>77</sup> Christine de Pizan. *City of Ladies*. 161.

slandorous words that have emerged from patriarchal society are misguided and unfounded. By converging in the city, women will be able to protect and comfort one another and gain strengths to overcome and heal from the slanders of patriarchy.

#### **Chapter 4 Expressing Female Sexuality and Participating in Female Affectivity in**

##### **“Eliduc”**

*She was profoundly learned in the Scriptures and all fields of knowledge, and she had so lofty a heart that she did not deign to marry, nor did she desire that any man be at her side” –Christine de Pizan<sup>79</sup>*

Each of the themes I have mentioned: the value of women’s intellectual being and education, woman as healer, and positive expression of female sexuality is an important element of, and precursor to, the theme of female same-sex affectivity. When I say same-sex affectivity or female affectivity, I am referring to the collaboration of women, at times sexual, at other times platonic, that results in the representation of a powerful relationship of female agency, intellectually and/or sexually, that occurs as a result of this bond. Both Marie de France and Christine de Pizan reach this acknowledgement in their writing, particularly in Marie’s “Guigemar” and “Eliduc,” and Christine’s *The Book of the City of Ladies*. Church fathers like St. Augustine declared that women were the root of sin and that childbirth held their only salvation in this life. To mentally conjure

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<sup>79</sup> Christine de Pizan. *City of Ladies*. 33.

women's generative powers also means to conjure women's sexuality. Thus men start to think of women in sexual ways leading back to how Eve man to sin. And while woman was expected to satisfy her husband's sexual needs, her autonomous sexual self was vilified as she was labeled temptress and seductress. Benjamin Semple suggests, "The dividing line between the sacred body and the profane body ran between the male and female for "the worst of the body was the female body."<sup>80</sup> Much medieval literature vilifies medieval women's sexuality. In *The Book of the City Of Ladies* and Marie's *Lais*, one can find moments when a woman's sexuality is regarded as a powerful and unifying force.

Acknowledging and showing the challenge of patriarchal constraints which demand that women be subservient are destabilized as "we find an increasing presence in later medieval religious literature of images taken from uniquely female experiences (childbearing, nursing, female sexual surrender or ecstasy), of female characteristics or experiences used to describe males, and of actual female figures."<sup>81</sup> Using female experiences to describe male behavior furthers the validity and importance of female affectivity. It strengthens and empowers the female sex by maintaining that these experiences and characteristics are strong enough to be used by the sex that formally has been the oppressor. Indeed, female affectivity may also affect the male sex by

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<sup>80</sup> Benjamin Semple. "The Male Psyche." 164.

<sup>81</sup> Carolyn Walker Bynum. *Jesus as Mother*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982. 136.

destabilizing the gender roles that society has placed upon them and allowing them to bond through their own sense of femaleness.

Medieval women did romantically love and otherwise emotionally bond with other women. Judith Bennett relates:

To approach the social history of lesbianisms in the Middle Ages, I suggest that we try broadening our perspective to include women whom I have chosen to call “lesbian-like”: women whose lives might have particularly offered opportunities for same-sex love; women who resisted norms of feminine behavior based on heterosexual marriage; women who lived in circumstances that allowed them to nurture and support other women (to paraphrase Blanch Wiesen Cook’s famous formulation).<sup>82</sup>

I believe it is irresponsible to ignore the certainty of same sex love and affectivity among medieval women; to ignore the concept that women had affinities for other women and who were not sexually attracted to men by nature or by choice, or who renounced much of their sexual life in search of other pursuits. As Francesca Sautman and Pamela Sheingold relate, “Although more work in this direction with respect to women is certainly needed, it is unwarranted to assume same-sex affective choices were unknown to medieval women or that women were too acculturated in oblivion of their sexual desires to resist the imposition of heterosexual life upon them.”<sup>83</sup> Recently, scholars have

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<sup>82</sup> Judith M. Bennet “Lesbian-Like” and the Social History of Lesbianisms.” *Journal of the History of Sexuality*. 9 (2000): 9-10.

<sup>83</sup> Sautman and Sheingold. *Same Sex*. 12.

begun to uncover and examine the possibilities of female affectivity and view the implications of it for the male-defined model of the medieval world. While we cannot and should not use the term “lesbian” or “gay” to define someone who had an affinity for the same sex, “It... seems contrary to the evidence to suppose that the Middle Ages were devoid of the erotic expression of sexual desire or, for that matter, individual sexual preference.”<sup>84</sup> As mentioned above, a concept does not come into being because it is named. For social constructionists who believe

that sexual identity and the individual’s understanding of herself as a sexual being is deeply rooted within the structures of a given society or historical period.... the very notion of sexuality or gay or lesbian identity is a modern construction that requires certain social, economic, and political conditions that did not develop until the seventeenth and eighteenth century for men and as late as the twentieth century for women. This particular stance has been adopted both by modern historians and by classicists who now write articles with such titles as “Sex before Sexuality.”<sup>85</sup>

When I use the terms same sex affectivity or female affectivity, I am referring to the rejection of compulsive heterosexuality<sup>86</sup>, whether intentional or not. Two women, or a community of women who live, learn, and love together, who gain strength from this

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<sup>84</sup> Jacqueline Murray. “Twice Marginal and Twice Invisible: Lesbians in the Middle Ages.” *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*. Eds. Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage. New York: Routledge, 1999. 191.

<sup>85</sup> 191.

<sup>86</sup> Compulsive heterosexuality can best be described by Adrienne Rich who in her essay “Compulsive Sexuality and Lesbian Existence describe compulsory heterosexuality for women as the assumption, made by Alice Rossi that “women are “innately” sexually oriented only toward men....” (Rich 13). A large assumption is made, therefore, that all women and men are straight. It does not always occur to people that perhaps one may be bisexual, gay, or lesbian.

relationship, without assisting compulsive heterosexuality, are participating in same sex female affectivity. The assertion that lesbians did not exist, that we cannot place our contemporary assertions onto them may be true, but also emerges out of the idea of compulsive heterosexuality. Compulsive sexuality was and probably still is a factor when studying the Middle Ages.

One may be under the impression that the expression of female sexuality would be nearly impossible given the oppression found in the Middle Ages. Within the Christian tradition, sexuality and sexual desire for both men and women, but especially women, was repressed rather than promoted. Marie de France and Christine de Pizan defy these patriarchal assertions by showing women who actively express their sexual desires and, by doing so, create positive outcomes. Moreover, both show women expressing their sexual desires in a way that is oftentimes independent of men. In Christine's *The Book of the City of Ladies*, we will see a subtler expression of sexuality. The idea of same sex-affectivity is profoundly shown as the gynocentric theme of the book. In Marie's *Eliduc*<sup>87</sup>, we can find both moments of women expressing their sexual desires combined with their need and acquisition of female affectivity.

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<sup>87</sup> "Eliduc," Marie's longest *lai* is a story of Eliduc, his wife Guildeluec, and a young lady Guildeluec. The tale commences with Eliduc who serves "a lord/ a king of Brittany,/ who loved and cherished him—/Eliduc served him loyally." (ll. 29-32). The people were jealous of Eliduc and his lord was convinced by the people that Eliduc was disloyal and so wrongly dismissed him. Eliduc then did not want to remain in the land and so left his wife Guildeluec and journeyed close to Exeter where he met a King who had a daughter named Guilliadun. He served this king well and was very virtuous: "Eliduc was courtly and wise,/ a handsome knight,/ brave and generous. The king's daughter heard him spoken of,/ his virtues described." (ll. 271-274). Guilliadun, unaware that Eliduc is married, falls madly in love with him. After his tenure with the king, Eliduc hesitantly returns to Guildeluec, though is grieving for his beloved Guilliadun. He returns to Guilliadun and to again serve the king and then brings Guilliadun back to his native land. The sea was very rough and one of the sailors blames Guilliadun for the unfortunate weather, and out of anger, reveals that Eliduc is already married: "You already have a faithful wife/ but you're

In “Eliduc,” through the transcendence of heterosexuality, Guilliadun and Guildeluec achieve and participate in female affectivity. Valerie Ross suggests that “Guilliadun is an assertive, but naïve, participant in the heterosexual economy of desire.”<sup>88</sup> Yet Guilliadun does possess assertiveness in terms of her own sexuality. We are shown that despite her naivety, she desires Eliduc, and even though he is married and he has “assured Guildeluec/ that he would be faithful to her,”<sup>89</sup> both Guilliadun’s beauty and enchanting conversation are enough for him to break his marriage vows and fall in love with her: “Guilliadun, who was very lovely,/ that she had been pleased to summon him/ to come to speak with her./ She took him by the hand/ and they sat on the bed,/ they spoke of many things”<sup>90</sup> and “The girl who had seen him/ wanted to make him her lover.”<sup>91</sup> Here we see Guilliadun’s sexual agency and, as Ross states, “her assertion;” she wants him and therefore, she will have him. Semple adds:

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bringing another back/ in defiance of God and the law/ of right and of faith” (ll. 835-838). Upon hearing that Eliduc is already married, Guilliadun faints and Eliduc believes her to be dead. After reaching land, he brings her body to a chapel. Guildeluec did not know what was wrong with Eliduc, but found out that he was grieving and went to the chapel to find the body of Guilliadun. She uncovered her and saw how beautiful she was and began to mourn. A weasel runs by and a valet kills it. Its mate goes outside and returns with a flower in its mouth and put it inside the other weasel’s mouth, which revived the weasel. Guildeluec places the same flower in Guilliadun’s mouth and revives her. Guildeluec brings Guilliadun back to Eliduc and Guildeluec takes the veil and “she established a rule of life for herself and her order” (l. 1143). With Guildeluec as head of the convent, Eliduc and Guilliadun married and “lived together many days;/ there was perfect love between them./ They gave great alms and did great good,/ so much so that they turned to God” (ll. 1149-1152). Finally, they both decided to serve God and Guilliadun joined Guildeluec’s convent: “She received her as her sister/ and gave her great honor;/ she encouraged her to serve God/ and instructed her in her order.” (ll. 1167-1170).

<sup>88</sup> Valerie Ross. “Transgressive Alliances: Marie de France and the Representation of Female Desire in *Eliduc*.” *Medievalia*. 21.2. (1997): 215.

<sup>89</sup> Marie de France. *Lais*. ll. 83-84.

<sup>90</sup> 294-299.

<sup>91</sup> 327-328.

While in the medieval Christian tradition women are given much of the responsibility for arousing male desire, they are not credited with knowing anything about desire. In the *Lays*, however, women are not simply passive objects of male desire that have to be removed from sight and mind; rather, they hold the key to greater knowledge about erotic life.<sup>92</sup>

And here we see exactly the sexual agency to which Semple refers. Although considerably young, she is aware of her sexual needs and is certainly possessing sexual knowledge.

However, what Ross refers to as naïveté does come into play when she finds out Guigemar is married “and from what she’d heard/ of her lover having a wife/ other than herself in his country./ She fell flat on her face,/ all pale and without color”<sup>93</sup> I would suggest that it is not in fact naïveté that afflicts her. For Guilliadun, love and sexuality are pure, meaning that she does not even consider it possible that she could live in a world where she could be deceived. The purity of love and sexuality are an important point; Marie, in defiance of Christian patriarchal tradition is suggesting that sexuality and sexual desire are innocent and pure, quite contrary to traditional medieval opinion that woman is the cause of man’s sin and that sexuality and lust are inherently evil. Ross adds, “The fact that the world is a dishonest, duplicitous place *would* be a shock to a protected young princess, but Marie appears to be saying that bold desire such as Guilliadun’s is an example of how all young women might feel free to desire and choose

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<sup>92</sup> Benjamin Semple. “Male Psyche.” 173.

<sup>93</sup> Marie de France. ll. 850-854.



whomever they wished, in the absence of such duplicity and social hypocrisy.”<sup>94</sup> In addition, I suggest that Marie shows Guilliadun exercising agency when dealing, or rather refusing to cope, with the harsh realities of love.

She loses consciousness twice in the *lai*, both times when she cannot tolerate the situation. The first time she faints is when Eliduc is about to tell her the truth about his marriage, but “before he’d told her everything,/ taken or asked for her leave/ she fainted in sorrow/ and lost all her color./ When Eliduc saw her faint/ he began to lose his mind;/ he kissed her mouth again and again/ and wept quite tenderly;/ he took her and held her in his arms,/ until she recovered from her faint.”<sup>95</sup> And, of course, she faints again upon hearing that Eliduc is married to Guildeluec. I see this as an act of agency rather than weakness. Guilliadun employs swooning and fainting only when she refusing to cope with reality. Guilliadun’s fainting is a method that brings them closer, at least temporarily. The first time she recovers, Marie writes, “By God,” he [Eliduc] said, “my sweet love,/ listen to me for a little:/ You are my life and my death,/ in you is all my comfort./ That is why I am consulting you, because there is an understanding between us.”<sup>96</sup> Not only is Eliduc in love with Guilliadun, but he respects her enough, as Guigemar does the lady’s maid, to consult her for guidance. For Guilliadun, however, we soon see that her desire for union is not with Eliduc.

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<sup>94</sup> Valerie Ross. “Transgressive Alliances.” 215.

<sup>95</sup> Marie de France. *Lais*. ll. 659-668.

<sup>96</sup> 669-674.

Ross states, “It is only through the agency (and, I suggest, the desire) of another woman, Guildeluec, and what emerges as a powerful transgressive alliance between them, that Guilliadun is saved.”<sup>97</sup> The alliance of Guildeluec and Guilliadun is an important aspect of what awakens Guilliadun from her, I believe, self-induced slumber, yet it is the desire for and beginnings of female-affectivity that inevitably completes Guilliadun’s life. It is specifically through Guildeluec powerful sense of self that creates an alliance between both her and Guilliadun and, inevitably, makes the *lai* such a fascinating tale.

Guildeluec loves Eliduc, Marie intentionally contrasts her *need* of him with Guilliadun’s. Guildeluec is much more independent than either Guilliadun or Eliduc as we see her living by herself for extended periods of time while Marie makes no mention of her grieving or longing for him. She is indeed happy to see him the first time he comes home: “When Eliduc returned,/ his lord was joyful and happy/ his friends and his relatives/ and all the others too, above all his good wife,/ who was very lovely, wise, and worthy”<sup>98</sup> but it’s what Marie leaves out of the tale that is important when it comes to Guildeluec’s love for Eliduc. She is not dependent upon him to survive. This establishes her autonomy and independence and is perhaps an element of attraction for Guilliadun, helping to lead to the ultimate union of herself and Guildeluec.

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<sup>97</sup> Valerie Ross. “Transgressive Alliances.” 217.

<sup>98</sup> Marie de France. *Lais*. ll. 705-710.

After Eliduc lays Guilliadun's body in the chapel, Guildeluec wonders why he is so grieved. Finding out that Eliduc has been in the chapel, she goes to seek the cause of his grief:

When she entered the chapel/ and saw the bed of the girl,/ who resembled a new  
rose,/ she uncovered her,/ saw the body so slender, the long arms and white  
hands,/ slim fingers, long and smooth;/ now she knew the truth,/ the reason her  
lord had felt such grief./ She called the valet/ and showed him the wonderful  
sight./ "Do you see," she said, "this woman/ whose beauty resembles a jewel?/  
This is my lord's love/ for whom he feels such grief."<sup>99</sup>

In this relatively private and sacred space, Guildeluec bravely lifts the veil of that covers Guilliadun, thereby uncovering and discovering Eliduc's secret grief. Rather than feeling jealous, this is, after all, the woman for whom Eliduc has nearly died from grief, she is astounded at Guilliadun's beauty. She understands Guilliadun's beauty to be so powerful, that it is no wonder Eliduc is in so much torment for the loss of her. Indeed, Guilliadun's charms are so potent that it not only allows Guildeluec to forgive her husband's indiscretions, but for Guildeluec to also fall in love with Guilliadun: "By my faith, I'm not surprised,/ if such a lovely woman has perished./ As much pity as for love/ I shall never have joy again./ She began to weep and mourn for the girl."<sup>100</sup>

Here, a magical moment happens: a male weasel runs by and the valet kills it whereupon its female mate runs places a magic flower in the male's mouth, restoring his

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<sup>99</sup> 1010-1024.

<sup>100</sup> 1025-1030.

life. Marie's writing itself is defying the hierarchy of patriarchal Christianity by allowing a female creature to magically restore a male. When Guildeluec then retrieves the magic flower and places it in Guilliadun's mouth, she awakens her and defies heterosexual codes and behavior by being a female awakening another female. Ross adds:

Guildeluec, in her appropriation of the weasel's creative resistance to human (read: male) violence, reveals and produces herself as an agent not only of female desire, but of transgressive gender slippage and transcendence of boundaries (such as: male/female, life/death, supernatural/natural, pagan/Christian, animal/human, fantasy/reality, text/life) in general. When Guildeluec appropriates the magical flower to save Guilliadun, she implicitly crosses all of the above-mentioned "boundaries."<sup>101</sup>

While crossing all of these boundaries is significant in itself, the ending of "Eliduc," is most important in terms of female affectivity. Mickel states how "Only Guildeluec's transcending love for both Eliduc and the girl can open the way for their happiness."<sup>102</sup> The conclusion shows Eliduc stepping aside, enabling female affectivity to bloom. When Guildeluec establishes her own convent, she makes way for Eliduc and Guilliadun to be morally and legally together. After Guildeluec awakens Guilliadun, she states, "I came after him, that's how I found you./ That you are alive gives me great joy;/ I shall take you with me/ and give you back to your love./ I want to leave him completely free,/ and I

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<sup>101</sup> Valerie Ross. 219.

<sup>102</sup> Emanuel J. Mickel, "A Reconsideration of the Lais of Marie de France." *Speculum* 46 (1971): 64.

shall take the veil.”/ The lady so comforted the girl/ that she finally took her away with her.”<sup>103</sup> Guildeluec loves Guilliadun with such passion that she is able to sacrifice her own happiness for Guilliadun’s. Guildeluec does not seem to grieve the loss of her husband. We only see Guildeluec’s full range of emotions and passions when she first encounters the lovely Guilliadun. This is possible evidence that Guildeluec all along was seeking something beyond heterosexual marriage. In fact, it seems as though she longed for female affectivity either consciously or unconsciously.

But finally, after some years, Guilliadun and Eliduc turn to religion and thus, Guilliadun turns back to Guildeluec: “With his first wife/ he placed the wife whom he so cherished./ She received her as her sister/ and gave her great honor;/ she encouraged her to serve God and instructed her in her order.”<sup>104</sup> In the sacred space of the convent, women are allowed to unite, free from male intrusion. It is this gynocentricity that helps to create female affectivity; the preference to surround oneself with women that gather together for a common cause. Marie has placed these two women characters in a space very much like where Hildegard von Bingen lived and performed her work:

Hildegard was privileged in her ability to free herself from traditional gender roles by living as a part of a female community, enjoying what Sara Evans has listed as a precondition for feminist consciousness, “free space.” This was the free space

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<sup>103</sup> Marie de France. *Lais*. ll. 1096-1104.

<sup>104</sup> 1165-1170.

provided by convent life and the absence of women's domestic and reproductive responsibilities...."<sup>105</sup>

Lerner reminds us, however, that the Catholic Church remained and continues under patriarchal grasps and influences<sup>106</sup>, although the space formed within the convent is often an exemplary for female affectivity: the power and bonds that occur when women converge.

Marie places Guildeluec and Guilliadun together in the free space of the convent to show her readers that unity and power between can be created in the absence of men. Indeed, "Eliduc" is actually Guildeluec and Guilliadun's story. Marie writes, "From these two the *lai* is named/ *Guildeluec and Guilliadun.*/ At first the *lai* was called *Eliduc*, but now the name has been changed./ for it happened to the women."<sup>107</sup> This statement reveals Marie de France's intentions for showing the power of the affinity of women, which, in turn, transcends heterosexuality, manifesting itself as female affectivity.

### **Chapter 5: Christine's City of Ladies: The Seat of Female Affectivity**

*My most honored ladies, may God be praised, for now our City is entirely finished and completed, where all of you who love glory, virtue, and praise may be lodged in great*

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<sup>105</sup> Gerda Lerner. *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-seventy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994. 59.

<sup>105</sup> 59.

<sup>106</sup> Marie de France. *Lais*. ll. 21-25.

<sup>106</sup> Marie de France. *Lais*. ll. 21-25.

*honor, ladies from the past as well as from the present and future, for it has been built  
and established for every honorable lady.*

*-Christine de Pizan<sup>108</sup>*

The concept of community as safe haven is also expressed in *The Canterbury Tales*.

“What distinguishes *The Canterbury Tales* from.... all his other previous work is its new premise: the creation of a closed, temporary community in which the participants, as they tell their stories and react to each other, can create new, ad hoc personalities for themselves or strip away the disguises in which they usually confront the world.”<sup>109</sup> Here is an example of an alternative community, although in this case fictive and literary, where one can feel safe to express themselves, regardless of sex, education, profession, and wealth. This is reminiscent of the community or city that Christine will write of in *The Book of the City of Ladies* where women can be free. Same sex affectivity is often found in the fluid spaces of alternative communities.

Same sex affectivity transcends sexuality and sexual preference. It must include all women in order to destabilize the dominant ideology that existed in the Middle Ages and continues to the present day:

Mary Anne Campbell has argued that the literature of virginity and convent life must be carefully reread and reinterpreted in light of new theoretical perspectives.

Building on the work of Caroline Bynum, she contends that *Hali Meidenhad*, while

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<sup>108</sup> Christine de Pizan, *City of Ladies*, 254.

<sup>109</sup> Robert W. Hanning. “From *Eva* and *Ave* to *Eglentyne* and *Alisoun*: Chaucer’s Insight into the Roles Women Play.” *Signs*. 3 (1977): 584.

encouraging women to follow the virginal life, was also promoting a life “akin to lesbianism.” ‘Holy maidenhood’ provided for medieval women not only a rejection of physical heterosexuality but also a rejection of spiritual sexuality—in favor of women-only physical spaces and women-identified spirituality.<sup>110</sup>

To be sure, the renunciation of heterosexuality for women who sought refuge in convents did not mean that women lost their sexuality or that they didn’t find collaboration and affinity with other women. Clearly both Marie de France and Christine de Pizan were influenced by these real-life instances of female affectivity and drew upon this real life female collectivity in their writing.

Medieval convent life is ideal to examine female affectivity. Here we find women who have devoted themselves to God and education, while being surrounded, nurtured, and affected by a community of women. The German nun Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179), is one example of a woman whose situation was bolstered as a result of living within a community of women:

Hildegard was privileged in her ability to free herself from traditional gender roles by living as part of a female community, enjoying what Sara Evans has listed as a precondition of feminist consciousness, “free space.” This was the free space provided by convent life and the absence of women’s domestic and reproductive responsibilities; but it must be understood that this relatively “free space” was a space within a patriarchal institution, the Catholic Church, in which all the higher

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<sup>110</sup> Jacqueline Murray. “Twice Marginal.” 191.



offices and positions of power were held by the male clergy. Clearly, in Hildegard's case this free speech commanded more autonomy than many female religious normally enjoyed.<sup>111</sup>

Gerda Lerner talks about how possible feminist inclinations that existed in the Middle Ages worked in Hildegard's favor. While Hildegard may have been exceptional in her autonomy, this did not mean that she is the only nun that possessed the clout to challenge the patriarchal constructs of the Catholic Church. Even nuns that did not reach Hildegard's fame and personal power still enjoyed the renunciation of heterosexual existence. Indeed, Hildegard's life is an exceptional one in that she was able to push the boundaries of patriarchal ideologies. She had intense relationships with both her teacher, the anchoress Jutta as well as another nun named Richardis.<sup>112</sup> Her sense of female affectivity was a source of power and motivation for her. Although we must acknowledge patriarchal elements in her writings, visions, and music, we can also observe her agenda of self-authorization and female empowerment:

Although Hildegard is quite traditional in her use of the masculine designation for God—Father, King, Redeemer—in her great historical events, she uses feminine symbols for God in her description of timeless events. The predominance of feminine figures, both in her visions and in the pictorial representations is quite startling. The three main figures to appear repeatedly are Wisdom (Sophia), the figure of Scientia Dei (knowledge of God)—who embodies both kindness and

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<sup>111</sup> Lerner, Gerda. *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness*. 59

<sup>112</sup> 59.

terror—and Sapientia representing divine wisdom in Church and cosmos.... The contradictory attributes of these female figures, kindness and awesomeness, and the strongly erotic language in which Hildegard speaks of them, underline the continuity of their symbolism with the ancient pre-Christian goddesses.<sup>113</sup>

I introduce Hildegard von Bingen because she was a real-life example of one who took part in the alternative literary tradition I previously mentioned, particularly because she was a female writer and also employed many of the themes in Marie de France's and Christine de Pizan's writing in her plays, letters and texts. She influenced those who took part in the alternative literary tradition through her life and work. Indeed Hildegard was cloistered and it was this fact which allowed her works to be recognized and to possess authority. Tilde Sankovitch adds, "The attainment of authority is clearly difficult for women writers, although not for the women writers who are placed in conventual context, in which authority is built into the structure of these writers' daily experience of participating in the very core of auctoritas."<sup>114</sup> Because she was cloistered, Hildegard's work was highly praised and respected, providing a launch pad for non-cloistered women to have their works acknowledged and respected. Hildegard von Bingen's life and works were driven by female affectivity and whose efforts opened a space in the literary world for writers such as Marie de France and Christine de Pizan.

*The Book of the City of Ladies'* central theme is female affectivity. With the help of the three virtues, Reason, Rectitude and Justice, Christine creates an even larger "city" by

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<sup>113</sup> 62.

<sup>114</sup> Tilde Sankovitch. "The French Woman Writer." 6.

allowing women readers to identify with the concepts. Through this identifying, female readership then adds to the “population” of the “city,” forming a stronghold against the slander and injustices that women face daily. The proto-feminist exertions found in Christine’s *City* add up to the main idea that resonates throughout and that is the gynocentric lifestyle, created and maintained through education, learning and teaching, valuing women healers, and expressing their sexuality as a positive force. All of these factors are found, separately and in combination, in Christine’s gynocentric city.

As mentioned above, the convent is a space where female affectivity exists. In *City Reason, Rectitude, and Justice* all refer to Christine as “daughter,” thereby implying that they are within a holy space such as that of a convent:

Dear daughter, do not be afraid, for we have not come to trouble you but to console you, for we have taken pity put on the ignorance which so blinds your own intellect that you shun what you know for certainty and believe what you do not know or see or recognize except by virtue of many strange opinions... Fair daughter, have you lost all sense? Have you forgotten that when fine gold is tested in the furnace, it does not change or vary in strength but becomes purer the more it is hammered and handled in different ways?<sup>115</sup>

By presenting herself as the ignorant, unintelligent woman, Christine is able, through the voice of the virtues, to educate other women who will be reading *The Book of the City of Ladies*.

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<sup>115</sup> Christine de Pizan. *City of Ladies*. 6.

Christine models her city on the convent. By using the appellation “daughter” and “mother,” (like how women in convents refer to their peers as “sister”) Christine creates a family of women joining together for a common cause of justice and equality. As we have seen, the convent life is an example of female affectivity. By educating women through her craft, Christine is able to form her own gynocentric utopia: a place where women can learn that she is more than the slanderous insults that the forefathers of Christianity have used against her; that she is a being of worth, intelligence, capable of life independent from men and united with other women. Christine encourages education in the *City* for all women and, indeed, she also holds herself to the same standards.

Natalie Zemon Davis writes:

The originality of her voice as female author must be stressed. To claim authority and believability, say, on royal history and war and peace was to step well beyond what women could usually claim for themselves. Even if using the topos of the “vision,” Christine was not legitimating her plea through the status of the female prophet, already carried out by Catherine of Sienna and her forebears. Hers was the vulnerable authority of learned women.<sup>116</sup>

The “learned authority of women” was indeed susceptible to a number of consequences as it was not encouraged in the Middle Ages. And yet, Christine repeatedly illuminates the fact that women must be educated in order to unite against the destructive forces of patriarchy.

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<sup>116</sup> xxvii.

There is no need for the presence of men in Christine's *City*. The "physical labor" itself is accomplished as the Virtues prove to Christine that what she has heard to make her forget her own self worth is fraudulent and inaccurate. Even though the physical labor itself is symbolic, Christine does not hesitate to declare that women are physically strong and able to defend and fend for themselves. Reason tells Christine, "Take the pick of your understanding and dig and clear out a great ditch wherever you see the marks of my ruler, and I will help you carry the earth on my shoulders"<sup>117</sup> Reason is suggesting that Christine, and indeed all women within the City, can depend upon her for help and assistance in all things; that women must never fight against patriarchy alone. Moreover, Christine's very choices of Virtues are significant. The Virtues are of the female sex and yet are not ones typically associated with women of the Middle Ages. Reason is attributed to intelligence, Rectitude is being morally correct and Justice is closely related to Rectitude, but also evokes the idea of being just.<sup>118</sup>

Christine again evokes female physical strength and valor when she writes about the Amazons. Reason states that after the men of Synthenia had died out as a result of the war, the women "courageously assembled and took counsel among themselves and decided finally that thenceforth they would maintain their dominion by themselves without being subject to men, and they promulgated an edict whereby no man was allowed to enter into their jurisdiction."<sup>119</sup> Christine shows that women can successfully

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<sup>117</sup> 16.

<sup>118</sup> <<http://dictionary.oed.online.com>>

<sup>119</sup> Christine de Pizan. *City of Ladies*. ll. 40-41.

live together, forming a community, without men. The Amazons rejected compulsive heterosexuality and embraced one another to successfully coexist.

There are at times, such as in Marie de France's "Eliduc," when female affectivity includes sexuality or an affinity for the same sex. And as Karma Lochrie suggests, "The tripartite division of medieval women into the categories of virgin, wife, and widow screens out the very possibility of female fellowship, community, and even love."<sup>120</sup> Removing the screen and allowing for the possibility of same sex affectivity allows us to observe that for much of *The Book of the City of Ladies* there exists an adoration of the virtues of women. It is striking how immediately Christine is enamored by Reason: "The famous lady spoke these words to me, in whose presence I do not know which one of my senses was more overwhelmed: my hearing from having listened to such worthy words or my sight from having seen her radiant beauty, her attire, her reverent comportment, and her most honored countenance."<sup>121</sup> As we can see, Christine responds to the Virtues similarly to the way Guildeluec responds when she first sees Guilliadun. Such attraction is a common component of female affectivity. The admiration of beauty and power goes beyond feelings of friendship to feelings of desire and passion: "I threw myself at their feet, not just on my knees but completely prostrate because of their great excellence. Kissing the earth around their feet, adoring them as goddesses of glory."<sup>122</sup> Christine is helplessly drawn to these women. As scholars develop various ways of looking at texts in

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<sup>120</sup> Karma Lochrie. "Between Women." 70.

<sup>121</sup> Christine de Pizan. *City of Ladies*. l. 8.

<sup>122</sup> 15.

terms of same sex or female affectivity, we can then begin to flesh out the understanding of female affectivity. Murray suggests, “By expanding our sexuality beyond the genital act alone and by applying new techniques of reading to medieval texts, scholars have come to hearing and seeing medieval woman-identified women.”<sup>123</sup> And of course, we should consider that love can transcend the genital act. We must remember that, in reading medieval texts, the lack of intercourse itself is not proof enough to dismiss same sex affectivity or the existence of love just because it has not been proven to be what we today consider homosexual, lesbian, gay, queer, homoaffective, or homoerotic. Still, Christine is creating positive images of women’s sexuality.

While we need to expand our way of looking at women identified women, or women who experience female affectivity, in medieval literature, oftentimes it is before our eyes. Christine writes, “With the rain and dew of your sweet words, you have penetrated and moistened the dryness of my mind, so that it now feels ready to germinate and send forth new branches capable of bearing fruits of profitable virtue and sweet savor.”<sup>124</sup> Christine uses four striking sexual images in the lines above and these words are directed toward other females (the Virtues) whom she admires. The first image is that of wetness and moisture and is explicitly vaginal. In the context above, we can read that as a sexual nature especially given the arduous claims of admiration and affinity with which Christine identifies with these women. Second, she uses the image of penetration (knowledge), which has “moistened the dryness of [her] mind.” Here, knowledge and

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<sup>123</sup> Jacqueline Murray. “Twice Marginal.” 206.

<sup>124</sup> Christine de Pizan. *City of Ladies*. 15.

learning has become eroticized and transformed the student/teacher binary. Thirdly, this eroticized knowledge is “ready to germinate” meaning that the seed has been fertilized, an image one cannot help but view as post-erotic. And finally, a post-birth imagery of words and knowledge that Christine has received will spring forth, as if the knowledge were her progeny and will share its own sweet fruits for others to know and experience. And indeed, this is true of *The Book of the City of Ladies*.

### **Conclusion**

Using protofeminist themes as the bricks, Christine de Pizan takes up where Marie leaves off, working to build a city where women join together in solidarity and affectivity. Looking backward, we can see that Christine sought to encourage women to join together in her metaphorical city to deter the effects of patriarchal slander, while later feminist writers such as Virginia Woolf, in her own room, chose a solitary battle. While one does not trump the other, Christine’s methods advocate for female affectivity that encourages change and equality on a communal scale.

The work itself seeks to heal that which for women has been a completely destructive force. Through the building of the city, women can take solace in the fact that there are other women who wish to learn, to love, and to be protected and who desire to be contained within this place of safety, knowledge and comfort; where women successfully exist without men. When Virginia Woolf did step out of her room, as she did while presenting her original speech that inspired *A Room of One’s Own*, she too advocated a



woman-only space: “I am sorry to break off so abruptly. Are there no men present? Do you promise me that behind that red curtain over there the figure of Sir Charles Biron is not concealed? We are all women you assure me?”<sup>125</sup> As Natalie Zemon Davis state, “The affinity of women and learning is both its vehicle and its message, and the one is inseparable from the other.”<sup>126</sup> Indeed, in Christine’s *City*, the message can be expanded include female affectivity, healing, respect, and protection as its message. Christine seems to have a presentiment of future women who will need and desire her city of female affectivity when she writes:

Most excellent, revered, and honored princesses of France and of all lands, and all ladies and maidens, and, indeed, all women who have loved and do love and will love virtue and morality, as well as all who have died or who are living or who are to come, rejoice and exult in our new City which, thanks to God, is already formed and almost finished and populated.<sup>127</sup>

This city is indestructible, largely because it is metaphorical and acts as a safe haven where women can enter at will, closing their eyes and remembering that there is a refuge from the slander and the oppression and, most importantly, that she is surrounded by women who relate to one another, empathize with each other and fight against patriarchal hegemony. It is this gynocentricity and female affectivity that emboldens women to bond and stand up, hands clasped together, against the injustices that women

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<sup>125</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Room of One's Own*. 80.

<sup>126</sup> Christine de Pizan. *City of Ladies*. xlix.

<sup>127</sup> 214.

daily face. Brick upon brick, example upon example of righteous, intelligent women enabled medieval women to understand that she must not believe the slander which emanated from the mouths patriarchal authorities of the Middle Ages. Marie and Christine let women know they are not alone in their struggle.

While not each theme that I have discussed must or does occur in a certain order to exemplify female affectivity, the inclusion of the themes allow the reader to make sense of Marie and Christine's proto-feminist exertions. Like Christine's bricks, the themes bolster and give strength to the female affectivity in their writings. Both Marie and Christine realized that women were going to need this protection, this all-inclusive blanket of female affectivity that women will seek to wrap themselves in and comfort one another for many centuries to come. And indeed, we still find ourselves longing for that *City*.

### **Epilogue**

This thesis emerged from my interest in the early expressions of feminism and same-sex affectivity in literature. As I researched the idea of same-sex affectivity and gynocentricity in Marie's and Christine's writing, their ideas were incredibly current. Their ideas go beyond women of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance and still resonates with female *and* male readers today. Although I was struck that the concepts were current, I was saddened to realize that they can still be applied to twentieth century

women. Women are still sexualized and demeaned; still do not receive equal pay, and still have to feel unsafe without the hedge of protection Christine's city would afford.

Although I have found it incredible that we can trace back a lineage (even further back than the Middle Ages) of women writers who were concerned for the equality and well-being of other women, many of these themes are still relevant problems. It occurred to me that feminism's goals and ideas have been trying to break through for centuries and although feminism has made many strides, women (and others) still need Christine's city for refuge against current issues such as pay inequity, sexual harassment, objectification, etcetera. Many of these issues can be applied to men and transgendered people as well. My hope is that with Third Wave feminism, we can take on these issues and that when we look back to the Marie's *Lais*, Christine's *City* and Virginia Woolf's writings, we will remark that conditions are much improved.

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